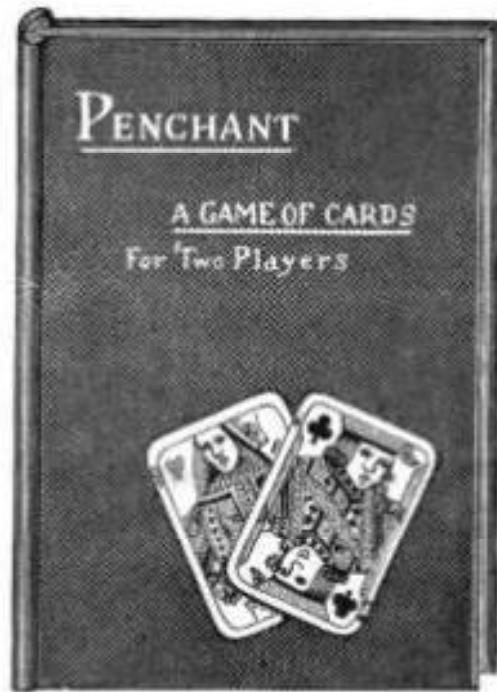


PENCHANT

Jonathan Kandell

THE
NEW GAME
OF
PENCHANT.

—
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Introduction

Penchant is a skillful two-person card game invented in 1893 by “Jack Sharpe” (pseudonym of John Smith McTear) but lost to history. It was described without attribution in R.F. Foster’s *Hoyle’s* of 1897 and reprinted in some subsequent editions.¹ Unlike its surviving cousins in the “marriage” family, Pinochle and Bezique, Penchant uses a single piquet deck. Its unique scoring, method of setting trump, and the addition of blocking add extra dimensions of skill to the basic bezique framework. Considering its age, Penchant plays surprisingly modern.

McTear was a British game expert who wrote for the journal *Notes & Queries* (a sort of *reddit* of its day). His critique of the then-emerging game of Bridge in *The Gentleman* magazine was widely discussed. McTear’s love of whist can be seen in Penchant’s scoring.

The Deck, Setup

A 32 card piquet deck, 7 through A. From an ordinary deck remove the 2s through 6s. The cards rank 7 (low), 8, 9, 10, J, Q, K, A (high).²

¹ Jack Smarte, *Penchant: A Game for Two Players*. Mucie & Sons. London: 1893. Robert F. Foster, *Foster’s Complete Hoyle*. Frederick A. Stokes, New York:1897.

² Note that in Penchant the 10 is ranked between J and 9, not A, 10, K as in the rest of the “A-10” or “marriage” card game family.

Six cards are dealt to each player, the remaining twenty cards constitute the stock.

Goal

The object of Penchant is to score the most points in four rounds of play. Players score for declaring combinations (“*Melds*”), and for winning Aces, Tens, and Sevens (known as “*Brisques*”) in tricks. Note that tricks are worth nothing in themselves aside from their value as brisques. A cribbage board or poker chips allow easy scoring.

Play

Each round consists of two phases: the first ten tricks (The Gathering), and an end-game of the last six tricks (the Meal).

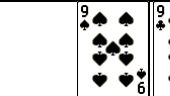


Phase one: the first ten tricks (“The Gathering”³)

Phase one consists of playing tricks, melding combinations, and drawing from the stock, until the stock is gone.

Non-dealer leads any card. Trick is won by best card of the suit led or the highest trump. *Cards do not have to follow suit, you don’t have to play trump, and you don’t have to win.* [ftr].⁴

As tricks are won, the brisques are sifted out, and spread face-down near the player so as to be countable by both players. The remainder of cards won are discarded and are not needed for the rest of the round.⁵


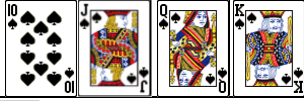





Winning a trick gives the winner the privilege of declaring *one* meld, which is laid on the table and scored:

<i>Name</i>	Description	Example	Points
<i>Sets of same rank</i>			
Twins	Two of a kind		2
Triplets	Three of a kind		3
Quadruplets	Four of a kind		10

³ I have modernized the game terminology around the theme of a family reunion. In the original, this first phase is termed the “Descant”; the second phase the “Briscant”. The melds in the original are named: *Pair, Triple; Royal; Penchant; Betrothal, Marriage, Court, Carte, Flush, Kint.*

⁴ The “ftr” trick rule abbreviation follows the system devised by David Parlett, in his book *A History of Card Games* (Oxford: 1991), see <http://www.pagat.com/mech.html>

⁵ Experienced card players may find it easier to simply keep track of brisques in their heads.

<i>Runs of Same Suit</i>				
Family	Three card sequence, must include JQK			3
Clan	Four card sequence, must include JQK			4
Extended Family	Five card of same suit, must include JQK			5
Reunion	Five cards in sequence of same suit, must include JQK			25
<i>Couplings</i>				
Marriage	K and Q of same suit			2
Besito	Q and J of same suit			2
Penchant ⁶	Q and J of different suits			1

Cards from the hand may be added to already melded cards to form new melds. The new combination gets scored “from scratch” even if some of the cards were scored previously. For instance, if a pair of Queens is already declared (2 points), upon winning a trick a player may add another Queen to form a trio (3 points). Then after winning another trick, a Jack could be added to score a penchant (1 point). In order to add onto an existing meld at least one fresh card must be added from the hand.⁷

Melded cards upon the table are still considered part of one’s hand, and may be used to play tricks. Cards played from a meld function just like those from the hand, and the score for previous melds is not rescinded when they are removed from tableau to use in such a manner.

At any given time players will have a total of six cards split between their hands and the tableau. Because melds get broken and rebuilt repeatedly during the round it is most convenient to lay one’s meld out in a single line without separating out combinations.

⁶ The term “penchant” is a double-entendre. McTear certainly refers to the penchant’s role in causing play to *lean toward* the trump suit; but, as in the rest of the Bezique family, there is also the cheeky implication of the Queen’s “penchant” for the Knave.

⁷ Melding in penchant is more liberal than in pinochle and bezique, where a re-meld has to be of another class or higher within a class.



Midgame, showing each player's meld tableau (facing up) and his won brisques (face down). The stock and discard piles are to the left.

After declaring and scoring a meld, a stock card is drawn by the winner, then by the loser. (Drawing a card without melding is a signal the winner of the trick does not wish to meld.) Only the winner of a trick may declare, and he may only declare one combination per trick. The one exception is that the loser of a trick may declare a Penchant if the winner does not declare anything.

Trump is set by the suit of the jack of the round's first penchant declared by a winner of a trick. Other penchants do not set trump. (For convenience, a card of trump suit from the unused cards or the discard pile may be displayed as a reminder.)

This process continues—a trick, a meld, and drawing from the stock—until the stock is exhausted after ten tricks. Either player may count the remaining stock at any point, and players may elect to turn the bottom card of the stock at right angles if they want to make this even clearer.


Blocking:

Twins, Triplets and Quadruplets are classified as either *minor* sets (composed of cards below jack, e.g. two 10s) or as *elder* sets (composed of jacks, queens kings, aces e.g. three queens). *A player may not meld minor sets if his adversary has upon the table cards which form a higher scoring elder set, or an elder set of the same score but of higher rank.* In other words, the highest elder pair at any given time blocks melding any minor pair; the high elder triplet blocks any minor pairs or trios; the high elder quad blocks all minor sets of any kind (but not runs or marriages). The blocking player does not have to have declared the elder set as such: it merely has to be found amongst her melded cards. You can remove a block by equaling the elder set, you don't have to top it; and once unblocked all lesser minor sets can be played. Note that Runs and Families cannot be blocked, just Sets.


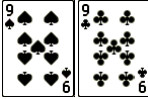
Blocking is much easier to explain by example. Say for instance Emma has melded a Marriage and a Penchant in the form of K, Q, Q, J (example A). Her opponent Tony may not meld his twin Tens (because of her two Queens); however, he could meld a Triplet of Tens, since a trio is higher scoring and can't be blocked by a pair even though the latter is elder. If she later turned her Queens into a triplet, however, the tables would have turned and he would not be allowed to meld any more minor triplets or twins (but could meld, say, four 8s). Another example (B): Emma has melded two Kings. Her opponent Tony cannot meld his minor pair of 9s. But if in the next turn he melds two Kings of his own, he unblocks her by tying her block, and can later meld the 9s. Alternatively, he could meld, say, three 8s to break the block, then the two 9s could be melded next turn. (Although blocks are set by elders, higher scoring minors can break the block, freeing things up to meld all lesser minors in subsequent turns.)

Example A:



However subsequently adding a third queen to her tableau  would block Tony from further minor triplets or pairs.

Example B:

Emma's  blocks all of Tony's minor pairs, e.g. . But if he melds two kings of his own, then the block has been tied and therefore rescinded, and he could go on to meld the two 9s on his next turn:



End Game: Last Six Tricks ("The Meal")⁸

The second phase of play starts the moment the last card in the stock is drawn.

At this point the various melds are drawn back into the players' hands and the last tricks are played out according to different rules, with the winner of the last trick of phase one leading. *Players must follow suit if they can, must trump if they cannot, and must win if they can. Otherwise they may play any card.* [F,T,r].⁹ No melds can be declared once the stock is gone. The aim of phase two is to win as many brisques as possible. These are added to one's brisque pile, but turned face-up.

After the six tricks are played, the score is tallied and the round is over.

⁸ Called the "Briscant" in the original.

⁹ See note 4.

Scoring

Melds are scored as they are declared and laid on the table. *In general melds score 1 pt per card.* The exceptions are the Penchants (1 pt for two cards), Quadruplets (10 points) and Full Family Reunions (Straight flush) (25 points).

Brisques won in tricks are kept separated out (face down during phase-one, face up during phase-two) to be scored at the end of the round. Brisques won during phase-two (those face up in each player's brisque spread) earn 1 point apiece. The player with most total brisques across the whole round then scores a "book bonus" of 1 point for every brisque won in excess of six (there are twelve brisques in the deck). If both players win six, neither scores the bonus.¹⁰

Note that brisques won in the last six tricks could count twice: once when won, and again at the end as part of the book bonus. For that matter, they could also have been scored previously as melds.

A game is four rounds. The final score for the game is the higher score minus the lower. If the lesser player fails to make 40 points during the four rounds he is "lurched" and the game score is doubled from its usual.

Modern Scoring:

I recommend the adoption of the following revision to the "19th Century" scoring resulting in a more balanced and tense game.¹¹ Score as above, with the following changes:

Melds:

Quadruplets (four of a kind)	8
Reunion (5 same suit in sequence, must include JQK)	16

Brisques won during phase-two are scored *2 points* a brisque. Players score a bonus of *2 points for every brisque in excess of six* won during the entire course of the game.

Tactics

Penchant is a game of constant agonizing choices and time pressure: with only six cards at play one is always choosing between tricks and melds, current, and potential. You must not only think of immediate points when melding, but also build a hand to win brisques in the last phase of play, worth half the score. Ten tricks of play does not allow much time for implementation. You must also decide between playing and thereby revealing, or holding and thereby hiding, key cards needed by the opponent. When to set trump to be in a stronger position at end is another difficult choice; if you wait too long your opponent will act. The "all or nothing" brisque bonus creates a constant pressure to

¹⁰ What I call the "book bonus" is an indication of McTear's love of Whist.

¹¹ The revision essentially doubles the importance of the brisques while shaving off the extremes of the high scoring combinations; this leads to an average of about 60 points per hand in total brisque points and about 90 points per hand from melds.

reach seven brisques, or prevent your opponent from doing so. Then there is blocking strategy and tactics. A particularly unique challenge of Penchant is how to win 10s (middle ranked) and 7s (the lowest rank).

The order of melding takes some thought: minor combinations are easier to score at the beginning before they are blocked, especially 8s and 9s that can only be used in rare five card combinations. Other things being equal, you should first meld cards you intend on earlier using in tricks.

As in pinochle, combinations should be built up slowly, since they score cumulative points: e.g. a quad is potentially worth 13 pts if drawn out (2+3+8); a straight flush potentially 19. But of course it may be blocked at any point and you need to finish in ten tricks.

Think carefully about playing a trick from your melds if it removes your block. But, typical of this game, the tradeoff is sometimes worth it.

Take careful note of the stock, as any melding strategy needs to finish by the time it's exhausted, and it's easy to be caught off-guard.

Winning last trick very important, since that person leads in the Meal phase, where every brisque is worth a clean point.

Take careful note of cards played in tricks that could have turned your Besitos and Marriages into larger runs, so you can abandon those plans and avoid fishing for cards in vain. Likewise, conceal in hand as long as possible cards that would create families for your opponent.

The two high-scoring "standout" meld combinations are crucial to monitor: Reunions and Quadruplets. The probability of being able to obtain a full Reunion across the Gathering phase is about 1 in 10; the probability of a Quad in the Gathering is about 1 in 4. From your first hand be mindful of the two to four potential Quads and Reunions your opponent might hold based on known cards. Keeping a mental checklist throughout the hand pays big rewards.

Going for the Family Reunion (Straight flush) combo is a challenging gambit. Even with luck on your side you have to make sure you hide your intentions keeping as many of its cards unexposed as possible. The Quadruplet is much easier to obtain but still has a nice bonus.

Jacks are especially pivotal, for without them marriages and sets can't turn into runs. And of course they are the only cards which can set trump.

JQK form the basis for many melds. They also allow domination of tricks in the end game if they are extended upwards. But be careful of letting the opponent sweep a run in the end game by playing a suit you don't possess.

Aces are most valuable, since they are simultaneously trick winners, brisques, and blockers. Melding aces is often best, since they can be “stored” there for future tricks, or saved even longer to control the end game, while blocking the whole time. But melding also reveals you have them.

Looking at different rank’s versatility in scoring different combinations, the cards go from Q (usable in every combination), to J, K, A/10, 9 to 8/7 (able to be used in only one combination).

The *Penchant’s* main value is not as a scorer but in setting trump and should be used selectively. There is little point in setting trump before you know both hands for the end-game; however wait too long and your opponent will set it for you. You could also set trump and then build your strong suit for the end-game. The J in your opponent’s strong suit is obviously a strong card to hold to prevent him trumping.

In short: Set trump when you have preponderance in a suit, are scoring badly, when it might help with declarations, and if the opponent will likely trump you in an unfavorable suit.

Winning 7s, the lowest rank, takes particular skill. You can still “win the book” without them, so one strategy is to win everything else. You can alternatively win 7s by exhausting your opponent’s remaining cards in the suit. Melding 7s early allows you to win them opportunistically in tricks; but leave them on the table too long risks having to play them in the end game, where they usually count against you twice.

The Flush is the only meld that allows you a couple low-card kickers, so it’s a good way to get rid of 8s and 9s, while scoring five points at the same time.

It should be noted that most of the bread-and-butter trick tactics of whist, jass, pinochle and bridge (e.g. stoppers, squeeze plays, finesses, etc.) also apply to Penchant.

Variations

The game with modernized scoring is balanced and tense. Some jazzy variations to consider:

- Setting trump:
 - Each new penchant sets a new trump.
 - Marriage of trump suit cancels trump for the remainder of the round.
- Melding rules:
 - Melded cards not allowed to be re-used for new melds.
 - Pinochle declaration rules: you can only reuse cards for a new meld of a different class (i.e. sets versus sequences versus families), or scores more points in the same class.
 - Penchants may only be melded if the winner of trick does not declare.
- UnBlocking: “Get out of jail free:” 7 of Trumps laid alongside a meld allows you to override blocking for that turn only.

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